

Protecting Children from Adult Content on Wireless Devices

FCC Consumer Facts

Background

Increasingly, people of all ages are using wireless phones and devices for communicating, for information gathering, and for entertainment – in all types of locations. And, as new wireless technologies are introduced, so too are new and expanded ways to get that information and be entertained via your wireless phone or device.

But with the benefits of wireless technology comes a potential harm: the growing use of wireless phones and devices by children affords them the opportunity to access adult material that may be inappropriate for them.

Controlling Access to Adult Material

Adult material is available through numerous sources, including magazines, television, movies, songs, telephones, gaming systems, and the Internet. But neither a blocking technology – like those used on televisions, telephones, and home computers – nor a ratings system – like those used for movies, games, and music – has yet been developed for wireless phones/devices. The wireless industry is working to address these issues, and the FCC is monitoring the situation.

Parents and caretakers concerned about children accessing inappropriate material via their wireless phones and devices may want to know more about the type of material available and how to limit access to that content.

What to Know

Be aware of the types of material that children can access via their wireless phones. The following types of material can be downloaded on many wireless phones and devices, and may include content inappropriate for children:

- Images, such as background “wallpaper” for the phone screen;
- Games, including some games that are also available for gaming systems, such as Playstation® or Xbox®;
- Music and songs, including ring tones, ringback tones, and downloads of full songs;
- Video, including certain television shows, movies, and music videos, as well as video programming specially made for and only available on wireless phones;

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- Web sites. Because of the small screens and limited keypads on wireless handsets, it's often difficult or impossible for you to browse the entire Web. Instead, many wireless carriers offer access to a pre-set list of commonly-used Web sites, such as Yahoo!® and ESPN®, that have been designed for viewing on a wireless handset. You should be aware, however, that most smartphones and personal digital assistants (PDAs), including the Sidekick®, Blackberry®, iPAQ®, and Treo® models, have larger screens and full keypads that do allow users to surf the entire Web; and
- Text, photo, and video messages. Many wireless phones and devices can also be used to exchange messages, including text and instant messages, as well as photos and videos. Your children can send messages to other wireless phone users or to e-mail addresses, and receive them on their wireless devices. In addition, text messaging technology can be used to request and receive specific material from various sources, such as Web sites. For instance, mobile users can send a message to a 5-digit "short code" requesting certain information, such as a sports score, a weather forecast, or entertainment content, and the information will then be sent directly to the wireless phone/device.

The types of applications and wireless content available to you and your children varies among wireless carriers. Different carriers offer different packages available for download.

The ways that you can purchase applications and content also varies by carrier. For instance, some carriers sell content on a per-application basis (e.g., \$4.99 to download a particular game, or \$0.99 to download a particular wall paper image), and these applications can often be purchased and downloaded directly from wireless handsets.

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On the other hand, some applications may be available on an unlimited use basis for a flat monthly fee, and you must subscribe to those packages through your carrier prior to downloading the material.

Finally, the type of wireless content available to you depends on the handset that you own. Newer, more advanced handsets are often capable of accessing a wider range of material, such as video programming and high-resolution games.

What You Can Do

If you are concerned about your children accessing adult material from their wireless phones/devices, consider the following:

- Monitor how your children are using their wireless phones or other wireless devices. For example, are they using them mainly for talking, or are they using them for messaging, taking photos and downloading applications?
- Check with your carrier to see what types of material it offers and what types can be accessed from your children's handsets.
- Check with your carrier to see if there are ways to prevent access to and downloading of content that may contain inappropriate material and that is available on a per-use or per-application basis (e.g., games, wall paper images, songs) from the wireless phone/device.
- Monitor your bill. Any content purchases made from a wireless phone should appear on your monthly bill, so check your bill to see if any purchases have been made from your children's phones/devices. The FCC requires that the descriptions of charges on wireless carrier bills be full, clear, non-deceptive, and in plain language.

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- Check with your carrier to see what handsets are available for your children that are not capable of accessing advanced applications that may contain adult material.
- Check with your carrier to see whether subscriptions to wireless data or wireless Internet packages also offer access to adult material on your children's phone.

What the Wireless Industry Is Doing

The wireless industry is in the process of developing a ratings system to classify content as either "appropriate" for users of all ages or "restricted" to users who are at least 18 years old. The wireless industry is making more tools available – such as, content filters or shields – to help you protect your children from inappropriate content.

The FCC is monitoring these industry efforts and has encouraged the industry to educate parents about the content available on mobile phones/devices and the ways they can limit access to that content.

For More Information

For further information on wireless services, visit <http://wireless.fcc.gov/> or contact the FCC's Consumer Call Center at 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) voice, or 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) TTY.

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Federal Communications Commission ■ Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau ■ 445 12th St., SW ■ Washington, DC 20554
1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) ■ TTY: 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) ■ Fax: 1-866-418-0232 ■ www.fcc.gov/cgb